



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Through productions, outreach and education, Berkeley Rep aspires to use theatre as a means to challenge, thrill and galvanize what is best in the human spirit.”

-From Berkeley Repertory Theatre’s Mission Statement (berkeleyrep.org)

Every month, the Albany Library and the Albany YMCA host a speaker as part of an ongoing Brown Bag lunch series. In August, the speaker was Susan Medak, the managing director of Berkeley Repertory Theatre. The topic of her speech was “The Challenges and Rewards of Community Theatre,” and she did a great job of presenting both.

She started with a brief history of community theatre, which started in the early 1950’s in communities across the United States. By the end of the 1950’s, these theatres were able to apply for non-profit status, and in 1965 the National Endowment of the Arts was established. In 1968 Berkeley Rep was started by Michael Leibert, a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. From the beginning, his emphasis was on valuing the actors by paying them, and providing work that reflected what was, as Medak put it, “intellectually stimulating in the

community.”

In 1997, Berkeley Rep received a Tony Award for outstanding regional theatre. They are now considered one of the five top community theatres in the country and they continue to test themselves and their audiences with new productions every year. Yet, just as with public libraries, the 21st century has brought many challenges. In fact, it was fascinating to listen to the list of issues confronting community theatres, because it is so similar to those faced by librarians.

First, there is what Medak called the generational divide. As she described it, what has changed is the way younger people interact with the world. In general, they have a shorter attention span and a disinterest in linear narrative. Consequently, there is a preference for briefer scenes and less pristine language. And – most surprising to me – was the fact that they are not as interested in inner conflicts. I im-

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mediately thought of all my favorite playwrights, like Chekhov and O’Neill. What would their plays be without all that tumultuous inner conflict?

Consequently, the challenge is to bring in younger people, so regional theatre can continue to be what Medak described as “a crossroads where people with different views sit side-by-side...where people argue with each other.”

The second challenge is accessing the general public. As Medak put it, the ability to do this has declined wildly. As interest in major networks and the print media has gone down, the public has narrowed its vision by tending to get all information from one source. Therefore, Berkeley Rep is now directing thousands and thousands of dollars into promotion.

Exhaustion was the third concern. According to Medak, the level of fatigue in our society is higher than ever before

and Berkeley Rep is competing directly with this. I find this ironic, since I believe the antidote to exhaustion is exposure to the arts, like theatre and literature. Nothing is more exhilarating than the chance to think about new ideas or be absorbed in the feelings an artist presents in his or her work. A society without these opportunities would be a frightening place indeed.

And, finally, money.

Ticket subscriptions cover only about 60% of their actual costs and the rest must be made up by donations to the annual fund. The good news is that Berkeley Rep continues to contribute to its community by offering school programs, discounted prices to students and seniors, and docent talks which surround new and classic plays with information to make them even more enjoyable. They take the concept of community theatre seriously and we are lucky to have them in our midst.